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ABSTRACT

The goals of this study were to explore how preservice students' use of content area strategies could inform teacher education, to determine what the student teachers learned by implementing content area literacy strategies and completing case studies, and to determine if case studies promoted the use of strategies in fieldwork. Subjects, 24 secondary school preservice teachers, completed case studies as a major assignment for their graduate content area literacy class. Case studies were analyzed to determine the breadth of strategies used and to determine emerging patterns. Two main categories emerged from the data: Metacognitive Check on Teaching included comments that reflected student teachers' abilities to examine their own teaching; and Diagnostic Awareness of Students' Abilities, which involved statements reflecting their awareness and monitoring of their students' abilities through the process of completing their case study. Results also indicated that the university class provided a supportive environment for students to practice and establish an understanding of what the content area literacy strategies looked and felt like in a simulation. However, more opportunities need to be offered in the content area literacy classroom for students to study the effects of the rich data source of case studies. (Contains 14 references and 3 tables of data.) (RS)

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# Case Studies as a Means of Exploring Preservice Teachers' Use of Content Area Literacy Strategies in Their Subject Area Fieldwork

Running Head: CASE STUDIES OF LITERACY STRATEGIES

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**Case Studies as a Means of Exploring Preservice Teachers' Use of Content Area Literacy Strategies in Their Subject Area Fieldwork**

## GOALS OF STUDY

"Why do I have to teach reading in my subject area?" "Why do I have to implement these literacy strategies, I don't see other veteran teachers using them?" These questions and others perennially surface with each new group of student teachers. As professors who frequently work with these perceptions we established three goals to help us challenge and change this resistance. Our effort was designed to extend previous findings regarding secondary teachers' perceptions of the use of content area literacy(CAL) strategies across the curriculum.

First, we wanted to explore how preservice students' use of content area strategies could inform our own teaching and that of our future students. Second, we wanted to determine what the student teachers learn by implementing CAL strategies and completing case studies. Third, we wished to determine if case studies promote the use of strategies in fieldwork.

## SCOPE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

Years of research have documented the resistance of secondary teachers to the use of content area literacy strategies (Conley, 1990; O'Brien, Stewart, 1992; Ratekin, Simpson, Alvermann, Dishner, 1985). For most of us who have been teaching these courses we are familiar with the wariness and lack of enthusiasm generated by a frequently state-mandated course in content area reading. Many of us have also seen a dramatic change in preservice teachers adopting positive attitudes towards content area literacy after spending some time in the course and having the opportunity to design these strategies for

in-class micro-teaching presentations. But do student teachers implement these strategies in their field experiences?

We suspect that course ideas are not implemented in secondary classrooms to the extent that we as teacher educators would expect. In fact, the second question that began this piece, "Why do I have to implement these literacy strategies, I don't see other veteran teachers using them?" strengthens this suspicion. As O'Brien and Stewart (1992), and Evans(1994) suggest we need to know more about beginning teachers' encounters with students and the general environment in their practica classes to better understand why the methods and approaches advocated by content area literacy classes are not translated readily into practice.

Furthermore, that we should expect the transfer from this top-down model (domain-oriented) where the university instructor provides the concepts and methods of literacy teaching and then requires the preservice students to implement and apply these has been criticized by a number of researchers (Alvermann, O'Brien, & Dillon, 1990; Wendler, Samuels, & Moore, 1989). In an attempt to change this top-down orientation, Mosenthal (1995) calls for a "practice-oriented" approach. Using this approach students are asked to use these concepts and methods as required to meet the needs within the context of the classroom. Accountability is tied to the situations that arise within the classroom. The preservice teacher working in this environment attempts to understand, design and adapt literacy activities as the situation requires.

In asking students to conduct a case study on the use of one content area literacy strategy, we hope to foster a "practice-oriented" approach where the preservice teacher would select a strategy supporting what they were teaching in the classroom. Further, we envisioned that the use of this strategy would enhance an understanding of the content, and the literacy needs of the students as well as provide an insight on the role of these concepts and methods for the beginning educator.



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## METHODS

### *Participants*

Twenty-four secondary students conducted their case studies as a major assignment for their graduate content area literacy class. These preservice students were completing this course for their fifth year Graduate Teacher Education Program (GTEP) that would culminate with a license in their subject area field. For the case study they were to design, the students could select any reading, writing, vocabulary or study strategy that is typically referenced and described in a content area literacy text such as those found in Vacca & Vacca (1995) or Alvermann & Phelps (1994). These typically include: study guides, vocabulary reinforcement exercises, study strategies and writing activities that guide students in learning from text. A number of these strategies or activities were modeled and simulated in the CAL class. In keeping with our planned "practice-oriented" approach we suggested students select a strategy that would enhance a lesson they were planning to teach in their Student Teaching I fieldwork, a ten-week experience. The content and the needs of the students were the determining factor for their selection of a particular strategy.

### *Materials and Procedures*

The purpose of the present study was to conduct a case study cross analysis of the use of content area strategies by preservice educators in conjunction with their content area reading course and beginning student teaching experience. While the individual cases the students designed are rich in detail, this analysis focuses more on common trends and patterns found among the students' case studies. This analysis offers a unique opportunity to view the preservice students' experiences and catch a glimpse of the impact of the content area reading course.

### *Data Collection*

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A case study was selected as a way for student teachers to tell their story about the use of these strategies. In their narrative students were asked to describe what led up to the teaching event, what happened during the teaching episode, and what consequences followed the event. In addition, we hoped to determine how the participants in the case study were thinking and feeling. In their case study, students were asked to include the following:

1. A description of the context. They were asked to provide a class profile consisting of the number of students, achievement data, and a summary of the cultural or ethnic background of their students.
2. A lesson plan, and a narrative of what happened from the beginning of the lesson to its closure. Students were encouraged to be as specific as possible in order to capture the flavor of the class. We asked the students to think about writing for an outside reader who wanted to get as complete a picture as possible from the case.
3. A sampling of student work that had been completed as a function of the use of a particular CAL strategy.
4. A reflection on the situation. The preservice teachers were encouraged to talk about their thoughts and feelings concerning the success or limitations of using the literacy strategy, to note whether they would use this strategy again as well as if they were to use the strategy again, would they use it in the same manner or differently.

***Data Analysis and Results***

Our first step was to identify the strategies selected by the students according to content area and focus. We wanted to determined the breadth of strategies used and to see if those that were modeled in the university course were also those that were implemented. Results are shown in Table 1 below.

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Place TABLE 1 here

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Next, we conducted a content analysis of the case studies examining them for emerging patterns (Spradley, 1980). We began with the assumption that we would find comments related to each section of the assignment and that natural categories would emerge. Once the categories were identified we reread the cases for the purpose of fine-tuning the categories and identifying category exemplars (Glazer & Straus, 1967). Comments outside the categories were not coded, counted, or included in the data analysis.

Two main categories emerged from the data. The first category, Metacognitive Check on Teaching (MC), included comments that reflected student teachers' abilities to examine their own teaching of the reading/writing strategies. The second category, Diagnostic Awareness of Students' Abilities (DA), involved statements reflecting their awareness and monitoring of their students' abilities through the process of completing their case study.

Within the first main category (MC) we heard evaluative comments about how the lesson went and/or what might have been done differently (EL), statements about the benefits of using the strategy (SB), decisions about using the strategy again in future lessons (FL), transfer statements connecting the use of reading/writing strategies in the university course to their practica setting (TS), and statements showing self-awareness of teaching strengths and weaknesses (SA).

In the second main category, Diagnostic Awareness of Students' Abilities, we heard descriptions of the teaching/learning context (DC), rationale for instructional decision-making (ID), the use of their students' reflections and comments about how the strategy or lesson helped them learn (SR), decisions about how and why they selected certain strategies (SS), and assessment of students' abilities, challenges, and/or gains (AA).

Once all of the case studies were read, reread, and coded, the total number of statements for each category was calculated. Each variable total was then

converted to proportions. Table 2 shows the proportion scores for variables within each main category.

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Within the Metacognitive Category, student teachers talked most about and made convincing arguments for the benefits of using a particular reading/writing strategy (SB). For example, in reflecting on the use of the RAFT technique (Santa, 1988) one student teacher argued that "by doing the exercise, students get to put into words their thoughts on the movie, its characters and themes. They get to play the role of one of the characters, so they get to feel what that person is experiencing. Then, they get to shape that person's experience by assuming his role and writing a letter. This will allow students to reflect on and analyze the content material."

Another student wrote that the "graphic organizer in this lesson provided a link between prior knowledge (foreign policy) and the topic of today's lesson (national security and vital interests). The graphic organizer allowed students to anticipate the relationships between foreign policy and national security and vital interests prior to reading the article... Understanding these relationships will provide students with a framework to explore the reasons why America has gone to war. The graphic organizer can be referred to in future lessons for clarification of the relationships between these vocabulary words and new vocabulary as it is introduced."

Clearly, students defended their use of a particular reading\writing strategy as it relates to the lesson they implemented.

Student teachers also made a significant number of comments evaluating the lesson (EL) and speculating about their future use of the reading/writing strategies (FL). For example, one found that "the Magic Square part of this lesson went exceptionally well. The students appeared to enjoy this nice

change of pace and were anxious to see how far they could get in solving the puzzle." Another describes her experiences in using the RAFT activity with the novel *Night* by Elie Wiesel combining all three types of statements: "I will definitely do this type of activity again. With an emotional piece such as this one, the letter activity gives the students a vehicle to use as an outlet for their emotions. Not only that, but also it was valuable for them to include their insights and opinions in a freer format than that of an essay or research paper format. Next I will focus more on some more emotional sides of the novel, now that I have discovered from this activity that they are in touch with the emotional side of the story."

These three types of comments (SB/EL/FL) account for most (.92) of the metacognitive comments. These findings are not particularly surprising, however, given the wording of the assignment.

Within the Diagnostic Awareness Category, student teachers talked most about the context of the teaching/learning environment. Again, this was a requirement of the assignment. What was surprising, however, was the fact that more than half (.52) of the student teachers' DA comments dealt with the assessment of their students' abilities and their instructional decision-making. In the following example, notice the interaction between the student teacher's description of the context and some of the instructional decisions he makes.

> When I took over the class this term, I was given the freedom to assign reading however I wanted. With the first novel, *The Red Badge of Courage*, I decided to assign almost all of the reading to be done at home. I believed that since these students were supposed to be college bound they needed to be prepared for the amount of reading they will encounter at the college level. This technique met with the same outcome my cooperating teacher predicted it would. Half of the students did not do it. When it

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> came time for me to teach *Ethan Frome*, I realized I had to make another decision about how I was going to assign the reading. Even though I still thought students should read on their own, I came to the conclusion that they needed to be weaned of being read to and shown how to do it for themselves. I decided that the middle ground for this change would be to give them time for Sustained Silent Reading in class. The students reacted well to this, however I kept being asked the question, "How are we supposed to get out of it as much as when you read it to us?" This strategy of the Three Levels Guide seemed like the ideal opportunity to scaffold their reading experience and show them how to get more out of their reading.

In another example, one student teacher shows how the reflective piece of the assignment helped her to assess her students' learning.

> The samples of student work show me that some groups understood the task better than others. There are some clear explanations that address the questions. Michael and Vitaly wrote for number three in the literal section that, "when they went to the hiding place, they just looked, they didn't get off their horses," showing me that what I thought was a literal, non-arguable statement was actually interpretive, because they could indeed argue it from another side with specific evidence. Meanwhile, Jason, Zak, and Pat wrote for number two that "The family of Kino does not like the music." Not only does this not respond to the task, but is shows me that they never even found the statement, which was written, word-for-word, in the second page of chapter six.

Our final step was to look at the correlation between the key variables exemplified above. As noted, students talked most about the benefits of using

the content area reading/writing strategy in their practicum setting (SB). Also well represented were descriptions of the teaching context in which the strategy was implemented (DC). Table 3 reveals a correlation of .337 for these two variables. Within the diagnostic category, correlations between descriptions of the context (DC) and statements of instructional decision-making (ID) are statistically significant. Student teachers' assessments of students' abilities (AA) was significantly correlated with their instructional decision-making (ID).

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Place TABLE 3 here

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## DISCUSSION

Although our sample size was small and drawing interpretations from our data is limited, we believe there are some clear directions provided by the data. We would like to use a series of questions related to the threefold purpose of our study to discuss our findings.

In essence, three questions guided this study:

1. What does our teaching need to include in order to foster the use of content area strategies in preservice teachers' classroom?
2. What did the students learn?
3. Were the case studies successful in promoting the use of the CAL strategies?

In response to the first question, the university class provided a supportive environment for students to practice and establish an understanding of what the CAL strategies looked and felt like in a simulation. However, more opportunities need to be offered in the CAL classroom for students to study the effects of this rich data source—the case study. By assigning the case study earlier in the quarter, students can bring their experiences back to the classroom for further analysis. As they share their experiences, their

understanding of the effect of these CAL strategies may increase and others less likely to incorporate these strategies may be more motivated to do so. In addition, this conversation may promote the use of more complex strategies like the study guides that help students simulate the process of thinking at different levels. In examining Table 1, there is a mix of CAL strategies evident, however, about a half of the strategies selected involved designing instructional activities that would little enhance the students' maximum comprehension of the content they were studying.

Preservice teachers can examine their case studies using the patterns established in this study as a starting point. They can evaluate their own cases using the patterns that we have summarized to analyze their own teaching behaviors as a scoring guide.

Further questions may increase the incidence of metacognitive and diagnostic categories evidenced in this study. Such questions as "How will what you have learned about students' understanding through the use of certain CAL strategies affect your future lessons?" or "How likely are you to continue using these CAL strategies?" can serve as starting points. In addition, preservice teachers can broaden the concept of context by examining the role of the cooperating teacher in their use of the CAL strategy.

We were pleasantly surprised by the emergence of both the metacognitve and diagnostic categories. Our preservice teachers were writing and acting more like experts than novices. There was much attention given to their own instruction in their classrooms—a characteristic of the novice. In addition, however, they were also focusing strongly on the students they were teaching—a characteristic of an expert teacher. The case study afforded us much more insight about our preservice teachers' teaching than ever experienced from other CAL class assignments.

Finally, we are convinced that a "practice-oriented" (Mosenthal, 1995) approach to encouraging preservice teachers to choose the CAL strategy

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suitable for their students rather than a domain-oriented one in which the university instructor assigns the CAL strategies to be designed and implemented is worth replicating. Actively including opportunities to understand the preservice teachers' encounters with students and their classroom environment (O'Brien & Stewart, 1992; Evans, 1994) in their classrooms offers bountiful dividends to the CAL instructor who provides these.

What did the students' learn?

The preservice teachers used their metacognitive skills liberally in monitoring their teaching in their case studies. This finding was affirming to them because their GTEP program actively cultivates reflective practice. Further, the application of these CAL strategies to a real world context–their classroom and its documentation through a case study revealed the practicality of studying their instruction systematically. This application may also have set the stage for an action research approach to their future teaching.

In addition, that these CAL strategies had a place and an effect on students provided a heightened confidence in their instructional decision-making. There was a sense that despite the challenges frequently met in their practica that questioned what they are learning at the university, they could fall back on the evidence supported by their case study.

Were the case studies successful in promoting the use of the CAL strategies?

Time will tell how successful the case studies are over time. For this study, graduate students, performing as strategic learners, completed the assignment which meant that they implemented the CAL strategies in their class. Many of the categories that surfaced reflected the guidelines outlined for completion of the case study. Yet it should be noted that their narratives at times move beyond the assignment attesting to the meaningfulness of this assignment. Whether this experience will wear well and result in the continued use of CAL strategies requires further study.

In conclusion, we believe the case study is a viable vehicle for crafting a study of the use of CAL strategies in the preservice teachers' secondary classrooms. All aspects of the teaching experience are grist for this medium: preparation, guidance, evaluation as well as the social, cognitive, and emotional development of students. Knowing more about how the CAL strategies enhance these elements in the quest of helping all students learn is a natural focus of the case study.

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TABLE 1

Content Area Strategies by Content Area and Literacy Focus

| Content Area | Prereading Strategies | Vocabulary | Comprehension | Writing |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| English/LA | Grocery List | Magic Square* | ·3-Level Guide*(2)<br>·Inferential Strategy<br>·Visual Representation<br>·Flames* | ·RAFT* (3)<br>·Writing to Learn |
| Social Studies | Storyline* | ·Magic Square*<br>·Graphic Organizer* (2) | Visualization* | ·RAFT*<br>·Response Journal* |
| Foreign Language | | Magic Square* | Guided Reading | |
| Arts | | Game | | RAFT* |
| Sciences | Anticipation Guide* | Magic Square* | | |

*Strategies modeled in CAL university course

(N)-number of instances of strategy

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TABLE 2

Proportion of Statements by Metacognitive and Diagnostic Categories

| METACOGNITIVE CATEGORIES | Proportion | CUMULATIVE | DIAGNOSTIC CATEGORIES | Proportion | CUMULATIVE |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SB | .469 | .469 | DC | .405 | .405 |
| EL | .242 | .711 | AA | .318 | .723 |
| FL | .206 | .917 | ID | .203 | .926 |
| SA | .075 | .992 | SS | .050 | .976 |
| TS | .009 | 1.001 | SR | .024 | 1.000 |

Note: SB-Strategy Benefits; EL-Evaluates Lesson; FL-Future Lessons; SA-Teaching Strengths and Weaknesses; TS-Transfer Statements; DC-Description of Context; AA-Assessment of Abilities; ID-Instructional Decisions; SS-Strategy Selection; SR-Student's Reflections/Comment

TABLE 3

Correlation Matrix for Key Variables

| | EL | SB | FL | DC | ID | AA |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| EL | 1 | | | | | |
| SB | .244 | 1 | | | | |
| FL | .244 | .052 | 1 | | | |
| DC | .001 | .337* | .205 | 1 | | |
| ID | .204 | .183 | .250 | .563*** | 1 | |
| AA | .246 | .158 | .140 | .231 | .442** | 1 |

Note: * p .108 ** p .03 *** p .004 Rejection Level = p .05 N=24

Note: EL-Evaluates Lesson; SB-Strategy Benefits; FL-Future Lessons; DC-Description of Context; ID-Instructional Decisions; AA-Assessment of Abilities

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